

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 8
Issue 2 *Spring*

Article 20

1977

The Dream of Childhood

Robert Pope

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pope, Robert. "The Dream of Childhood." *The Iowa Review* 8.2 (1977): 45-59. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2194>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Dream of Childhood

My mother groaned! my father wept,
into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

—William Blake
“Infant Sorrow”

Father was a zoologist of parts. Mother loved puzzles. Father took things apart. Mother put them back together, any way she could. By appearance, both were Norse gods, gigantic blue-eyed, blond-haired creatures. They seemed incredibly huge when they sat at the kitchen table talking quietly together. I had never seen my own clear reflection in a mirror until my thirteenth birthday.

Certainly I had lingered over my miraculous shape in the distorting waters of nearby streams and rivers, but this image served only as a form upon which to construct the fantasy that I looked exactly like my beautiful parents. I had never considered the possibilities of other places, other houses, other parentage.

Father's beard covered his chest. Mother snagged her fingers in it. I thought his head the size of my entire torso. His cheeks and neck splotched red whenever he worked in heat or cold, or when he got mad. In anger his playful, loving hand could send me spinning in wild somersaults. He paid little, if any, attention to me.

He put his arms around a tree and leaned backwards. The tree made a deep sucking rip as it came from the earth like a carrot. Father set the tree on one side and went through the hair-like roots, smashing each clog between his fingers. Who knows how large the tree, or whether, in actuality, I saw him pull a carrot from the ground? It makes no difference. Both are the same.

He took animals apart to discover things about them. It was not uncommon to find the large hind legs of a deer on the living room floor. Imagine, if you will, the effect of this upon the mind of a child already given to fabulous meanderings. I stood in the room and stared at the legs. The outline of shadow cut them loose from the floor, made them appear to be hovering in midair.

I followed the trail of limbs up the spiraling staircase to the closed, locked door of my father's workshop. What, I wondered, could he have left to work with? Mother complained he could dissect the beasts entire in his workshop; father's excitement always got the best of him. I recall uneasy moments in the woods surrounding our house when I came across the carcasses of large cats, boars, whose limbs seemed to have been literally . . . but I won't linger on this. No matter how much I desired my father's approval, I kept from his easy reach.

One day father told me an average civit cat contained approximately three miles of internal wiring. To prove this statement, he strung together arteries, veins, capillaries (tiny, almost invisible things) of a civit cat he had trapped in our woods. He wound these around trees, over boulders, across fields and set me to measuring with a yardstick—a merciless task of days rather than hours. He stood behind in his red plaid wool shirt, arms perpetually crossed, face stern, unyielding. Smoking his pipe. Leaving a trail of matches. Enough! How I craved his approval . . . how I craved his loving touch. I turned to him and said, "Wow! Sure are a lot of veins, hunh Dad?"

At best he would nod. I turned back to the gruesome, thankless task, flopping the yardstick end-over-end. How many days and nights did I labor over strands growing stiffer, blacker every hour? When I reached the end, at the edge of a clearing, I shouted for joy. Father was somewhat elated. I turned to him laughing, proud to have completed the task. Finally, finally, he smiled. We smiled at each other. The moment that then passed grew interminable. My laughter became tinged with despair. Father stopped smiling. I could not remember the number of yards I had finally counted. . . .

Father's skin grew red blossoms of anger. His mouth opened wider and wider. Behind us we could see the veins would not last another measuring. Already the string had cracked in several places. His large hand darted from his side. The world spun. From the ground I watched him light his pipe, turn on his heel, and stride back through the forest. Father, father, forgive your errant son. Strange creature. I can almost believe you are real. What would I not have done for your lips upon my cheek, your hard, gentle hand upon my head?

Mother wore her hair long, to the back of her knees, often braided into golden arms she could hang around the shoulders of both her men—I mean father and I. She took walks in the early morning. Once, from my window, I saw her touch with the tip of her tongue a bead of dew that set on a petal of a white wildflower. She touched it a long, languorous moment before she sipped it in.

The blue harpsichord she played daily filled our house with a bright,

giddy music which was only one weave in the natural fabric of my childhood destined to be stripped away before my thirteenth birthday.

How mother and father loved birthdays. My childhood seems one birthday followed hard by another. Strange celebrations! Mother and I were both Pisceans. Her birthday preceded mine by a few days, but more of this later. I have been speaking of our house.

Daddy built the lighthouse atop his mountain long before my appearance on this unusual planet. As all children, I could conceive of no event having taken place before my birth. I imagined the lighthouse and my particular arrangement of mother-father-son had always been the center of the universe. Born to the lighthouse, I spent many happy evenings flashing the huge beam along the dark, seagreen treetops, illuminating ships in wild distress. I sent lonesome, hollow hoots down the mountainside into the valleys of undersea towns and cities of which I knew virtually nothing except what I read in storybooks my parents could not keep from me.

Mom and Dad would have nothing to do with civilization. They loved to watch the faces of frequent astonished paleontologists who scoured our mountain for traces of ancient fishes—skinless, jawless, boneless amphibians that had slipped around our rock in the antedeluvian ocean. The knobby-kneed scientists in their khaki shorts and beards sat in our round kitchen, the bottom floor of the lighthouse, and told of dusty searches.

While they sat and talked they eyed our walls hungrily, the stones of which were rich with the bizarre shapes of those unearthly amphibians. They would finally stand and touch these, repeating a chant-like litany that fascinated me as much as the expressions on their faces. *Triassic, jurassic, ordovician . . .*

Antedeluvian! How I loved that word. I do not know where I heard it first, but I named the frothing treetops of night The Great Antedeluvian Ocean, repeating the name over-and-over, using it in songs:

My father was the keeper of the Eddy-stone light,
He married a mermaid one fine night;
Out of this union there came three:
A porpoise and the serpent and the other was me!
Yo-ho-ho, the wind blows free,
Oh for a life on the Antedeluvian Sea!

I could almost believe mother a mermaid. The way she looked when she tied back her hair and set to work on father's dissected animals. She would sit for days at her desk, drawing on huge sheets of paper. Her long hair twisted down her back, covering her chair, her feet.

When she finished the blueprints, she set to the task, behind closed

doors, of reassembling the scattered animals. But not as you might think. She created new and *outré* beasts, jumbling heads, skins, eyes, ears, feet . . .

She clapped her hands and shrieked with laughter when father uncovered her latest creation from his cast-off bits. Then father put his great hands out at either side and brought them together slowly. The loudness of his clapping hands rings in my ears even now. He opened his mouth and tilted back his head and laughed. They danced around the new creation and clapped and sang until they could no longer stand it and disappeared into an obscure room of the lighthouse used only for such celebrations, into which I had never been permitted.

How well I remember, imagining myself small and shifty, sneaking in behind mother to watch her at her drawing. My attention would always be drawn to the large black cabinet on her desk. This she kept locked, and regularly, once-a-year, on my birthday, she led me into her room to show me the fabulous bauble inside. Mother and father had strict rules about privacy; none could invade the sanctity of the bedroom of another without invitation. Reasons existed for this strange arrangement; let it rest that she kept the contents of the cabinet from my father's destructive hands.

On her birthday, I violated mother's privacy and hid in her closet to watch her wake. Father had planned pranks. I wanted to be with her, a comfort against his tyranny. She woke and threw off the sheet which covered her and stood full and brazen and naked in the red beam of light arching through her high window. The rims of my eyes palpitated, as if focusing my vision more powerfully. I admired her white skin, her round breasts and firm buttocks. She had reddish pubic hair that spread in a wide, rich wedge almost to her belly button, where it ended suddenly, starkly. Soft tufts curled at the tops of her thighs. I bit my lips when she began counting out her toe-touch exercises . . . enough, enough. I have gone too far. Mother, I had no intention of seeing you naked. No intention but your comfort. Forgive me. Forgive your errant son.

On the other hand, I must admit I was not sorry for the sight. Even while part of me fought back, urged my body to withdraw further into the closet so I could not see her, some other, grosser part of me would not budge. I froze in horror when she walked sullenly, still tired from sleep, toward the closet in which I had secreted myself. I almost called out, "No, mother, do not approach. You will only be disappointed in your only boy." I thought I had said it out loud, for she turned and walked back toward the door, resolved to leave the room absolutely bare. She had seen father's gift on the threshold.

Father had dismantled the blue harpsichord on which mother daily played . . . even now, when I hear the high, tinkling tones of the harpsi-

chord I think of my mother standing naked in her bedroom, wise and vibrant with a lust which glowed just beneath her skin.

How little I really knew my mother.

I thought it would crush her spirit. The cruelty. Not so. She followed the trail of pieces down the staircase, spiraling round and round, down into the kitchen. She stopped to handle each new wire, each splinter of blue scroll-work, each broken key. I followed at a distance, watching her long shadow stretch back around the tubular walls. At the bottom of the stairs I saw the shadow of her arms open wide. She squealed: "Just what I wanted!" Then she brought her hands together in the inevitable clap. Father shushed her at first, then I heard him bellow, "There! What do you think of your sublime machine now?" He laughed and laughed a peculiar laugh ending in uncharacteristic giggles. The sounds I then heard are hard to explain. *Flapping*, will do. *Sucking*, as well. *Grunting. Breath, breath.*

I crept to the bottom of the stairs and peeked into the bright kitchen, red with morning. Among the ancient symbols on the walls I saw the shadow of a tremendous beast I had never known. It resembled a giant, trembling grasshopper. I followed the shadow to its source.

I will go no further out of respect for my parents and parenthood in general, except to say that I had never seen so many huge red blossoms grown on father's back. And not just on his back! His huge, dark red cods slapped my mother's buttocks. Her hands gouged his back. Father had mother on her back on the cold stone floor of the kitchen and she did not seem to mind . . .

Not only did she not seem to mind, she emitted high, piercing shrieks which could be construed only as uncontrolled happiness. I was not prepared. While I should have been as delighted as mother that such a pleasure exists for the solace of adult life, I was mortified. I had no distance on the thing. All around them lay the pathetic shreds of splintered blue wood, tiny white keys, sprung wires, in short, the guts of the sublime machine.

By this time I could freely stand beside them without their notice. Mother's eyes shut tightly, and father's too I suppose, though his head was buried in the mat of golden hair. In another instant I had to jump back. Father spun mother onto her knees and proceeded to enter her raised . . . I remember I have promised not to enter the sanctified domain of marriage. I shall not. Forgive me and let us go on to the high final shrillness of my mother punctuated by the deep, grunting ungh, ungh, ungh with which my father finished off. He fell forward onto her; they slumped together. Only fear kept me from shouting the question which froze on my lips: *What, dead?*

But a moment later father raised his buttocks and the ceremony renewed. I stepped back up the stairs sensing I had not been invited. Where the cake and ice cream of my childhood?

I dashed into the library, choking on my guilt and shame. Betrayed, *betrayed*. I felt foolish, vain, small. Left out. I stayed indoors for days. I lingered at the windows of an evening when the light fell morose. I shied from my parents when they approached. I spurned their caresses, so sparingly offered. I began the secret practice which I shall not describe. We all know too well.

It rained for days; the *hush* of rain layering over the forest ached in my ears. Each morning I sat up in my white sheets telling myself I would pull myself together, stop acting the fool. My mornings filled with good resolve, absurd gestures I thought would please my parents. My afternoons filled with headache, irritation, and finally, my evenings with desperation and that secret practice. And I began another habit, a peculiar laugh . . .

On one such miserable day I woke and went downstairs to linger in the kitchen. Outside, the grey of rain stood between me and the world. I leaned at the window, watching a grey stone in the yard. The stone seemed aloof, solitary, and, for this reason, I admired it. The longer I stared at the stone, the harder and colder I myself felt—I liked the sensation. I need no one, I told myself. I am like that stone in the rain, impervious, superior. I laughed—*that* laugh, which I shall describe later—and desired that rock ever in my presence, a totem for my existence. I took off my shirt. This made me harder. I walked into the rain.

I strode like father, long, wide steps, swift but unhurried. When I reached for the stone it moved beneath my touch. I dropped my arms. This bewildered me. I thought: imagination. I took another step and reached resolutely for the totem rock. Again it moved, this time several feet away, hair bristling from its round surface.

I dropped my arms again and stood staring at the rock. I ran and leaped, catching ahold of its hind legs. It jerked and sprung to free itself from my grip; I fought back, resolved not to let go. I held it away from me, a mad divining rod. I swung it round and round so it could not reach me with its teeth.

It was a grey rabbit, but how transformed by rain and mud! I smacked it once on the sod; I cuddled it, stunned, dazed, to my chest. When I stepped back into the kitchen, my parents laughed and clapped, as usual. I shook my head. How tiresome they could be.

Father livened things up by holding out his hands. “The rabbit,” he said. “Give me the rabbit.”

Then I laughed that laugh, the first time they heard it. It began with a short snorting through nasal passages. Another of the same followed quickly

upon the first. On the third snort I laughed and held—a hard, cold wheeze. A laugh like the cough of a cougar. Finally, I laughed once more without the snort, high, piercing. It went *snort, snort, snarkle, haw*. A poor representation at best.

My parents looked at me curiously, at one another. Their reaction made me repeat my performance, louder, more openly hostile: *snort, snort, snarkle, haw!* It said: I know about you! I ran to my room.

On my way up, the rabbit sprung to life and leaped from my arms. I blocked the stairs against his escape, even had to kick him several times to get him upstairs. I called at him in a hoarse whisper: “Up, you devil. Up.” I caught him with the side of my foot and sent him spinning up the stairs. I repeated this action until I got him into my room. At the end of each flight he sat shivering, docile at last, expecting any second the next kick, which inevitably came. How sorry I felt for the poor beast. I only did these things for his own good.

With the rabbit as comfort, though he would never come near willingly, I grew accustomed to the presence of my parents again. They seemed to me creatures I had never known, creatures filled with unspeakable fury. My pet made my solitude less painful.

My parents looked seriously at one another when I entered the room with my head down, my arms behind me. I can only imagine how grotesque I must have looked to them, skulking in doorways, lingering in the evening light, humming to myself. I noticed things.

The idea that I was a *diminutive* of my parents came under suspicion. When had I looked up into my father’s face? When had I ever stood on tip-toe for my mother’s good-night kiss? Worse and worse!

I became bookish. I spent whole days in the library. I read myths, fables, fantasies of all manner—the worst reading for one as unstable as I. I enjoyed most, and still do, the fables of the Vampyre, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Shakespeare. Several of the plays spoke of unnatural children. Immediately, I knew myself to be such. Lines like: “What, I a bastard?” came to mind so easily. I had no idea, of course, what the words meant, but suspected it had something to do with the unnatural act I had seen in the kitchen. I became a monster of my own conception. I laughed. I dogged my parents wherever they went. I felt out of proportion, ungainly. I tripped over my own feet, spilled my soup, stepped on the rabbit, knocked books from shelves for no reason. I looked askance at my father; I snarled.

Mother survived the experience, recognizing, however, that things had changed. Things, she understood, were not as they had been silently agreed upon. Things, I understood, had never been what I thought.

Bitter, bitter to know that I would be 13 in days and must publicly acknowledge manhood. Coupled with the incident in the kitchen on mother’s

birthday, this led me further into despair. I grew rougher on the rabbit, punishing him for his natural functions, which he often performed on my bed. *Mother, father, you gave me this existence! Until now I have been happy with it. But you never explained why I existed, or what I should do with this existence, and, most pressing of all, where you dreamed me up . . . I imagined you plotted behind my back to get alone so you could do what I had seen you do on the kitchen floor . . .*

I lurched in on their quiet conversations. They sat at the kitchen table one night, unaware of my existence, my presence in the doorway. I looked around the room at the ancient amphibians imprinted on the walls and heard my father whisper, "Are you tiring of the Doric mode?" The laugh began and I could not stop it. I stood neighing in the doorway. Mother asked me to sit with them. Father shouted. I ran up the stairs and locked myself in my room; I buried my head in my pillow to contain my laughter.

They even considered inviting our nearest neighbor, whom I had never seen, because he had a son or grandson my age, but they feared my behavior.

The final episode of the strange fall from the lighthouse began in March of my thirteenth year—my birthday. It began as every morning, full of good intentions. I woke to see the distant, impassive eyes of my rabbit staring at me from a corner of the room. It irked me that he had never made up to me. I started to holler at him when I heard my mother's humming voice, her step on the stairs.

I pulled the cover to my chin, feigned sleep, hoping some act of kindness would grace my prone, sleeping body which would not be granted my mean, petulant waking self.

She sat beside me on the bed. I rolled into her naturally. She rubbed my back, moving her nails lightly in a circular motion. I woke slowly, languorously, stretching. I asked her what day it was instead of what time. She laughed and sang the birthday song, rubbed my head. How I must have looked at six-feet, six-inches, sitting up with a tray of breakfast: fruit and eggs and juice and coffee, even coffee. I hated coffee, but downed it and begged for more. She brought more. Something in that action, a woman bringing food, coffee, has always made men fall in love. Even now I am subject to an irrational love of waitresses.

With the red light of morning pouring through the skylight (my room was on the very top, just beneath the glowing eye) and mother beside me on the bed, feeding me, I thought, "This is life. Proper life."

Still laughing, she produced a birthday gift from the neighbors I had only heard of: a stuffed dog. A strange gift for the young man unless you realize I had seen this one several times in the forest when I walked alone those dreadful days before my birthday. He came loping up to me, a large

animal, his legs swinging pendulously. I thought he meant to attack me, but he sailed past, square head high, unaware, it seemed, or disinterested in my presence. His disappearance into trees saddened me. Far off, I heard him bark once. This happened invariably at twilight. He burst suddenly from the obscurity and moved past, staring at something beyond . . . I took everything as a sign. I had almost convinced myself he did not really exist.

The gift lowered my mood. I grew dark inside. I screamed: "Who are these madmen?" They had no women out there. I assumed all men were brutes when isolated. I caught myself before the hideous laugh, resolved against making a fool of myself before this beautiful and gracious woman. I ate slowly. Each mouthful went down hard, tasteless. The dog stared just beyond my ear, or, it seemed, at some horrible dark beast ready to fall on us all. Or, at least, on me.

When I finished eating, she took my hand and led me into her bedroom. She turned every few minutes to shush me with a finger at her lips. I giggled to see her so intent, flushed. Her warm hand on mine, I forgot my burdens, troubled only vaguely by the dog, a distant memory. We were going to her bedroom. Her nightgown billowed out behind—I noticed how mother's belly had grown plump. It only made her more attractive. On the threshold, I stopped. She looked back at me. Into my eyes. I must have looked frightened; I seemed to see that red morning of mother naked . . . she brushed my cheek.

"Are we getting too old for this, Edward?" she asked. I shook my head, for well I knew the mission, and so do you, if you have listened closely. Whatever vile thoughts swarm in your mind, we were about the ceremony of birthday. The black cabinet. The fabulous bauble. We had no need of words. No formal litany. We stood before the desk at which I had so often seen her at work. Light hung like moisture in the crevice between the closed doors of the cabinet. She turned to watch my face while she slowly opened the doors. Light streamed forth. I closed my eyes against the initial burst and watched bright, colorful shapes like ancient fossils writhe on my eyelids, writing words that never wholly formed. I covered my eyes, rubbed them. Slowly, I parted my hands.

What had struck me most as a child were the beams of yellow light streaming from his eyes. Inside the case stood father's original model of man. The layers of the skin had been blown, with father's own breath, from semi-opaque glass the thickness of tissue which became absolutely transparent when the tiny light inside each organ passed through. Each organ had been blown (with his own breath) from glass reddish-blue, grey, odd colors difficult to describe. The model had dark hair and beard, and facial characteristics different from any I had known in my childhood. Mother had her back to me. Who knows what she saw inside.

Father had made our fortune on the toy, which has become common in its bastardized forms. She kept the original in the cabinet, away from father. This she loved more than anything father had ever made; to me it was incredible that father had ever made anything. I had come to think of him as destruction itself. Breaking things, taking things apart, hurting people (me, mother). But, evidently, for the brief period of their courtship, he created.

This fiery first impulse born of love had wasted itself rapidly. He returned to his former ways after their marriage. With a vengeance. He not only threatened to destroy everything he made, and which he had originally thought so good, but had actually ripped up volumes of his poetry, destroyed certain other of his creations.

I remember, from the dream of childhood, when he purchased a load of dynamite. He decided to blow up the lighthouse and, if he could, the entire mountain. My mother knew her only argument. She set her back to the lighthouse, spread her arms back around the walls, stared into the sky. Father stood inside the forest, on the edge of the clearing. Light through the trees speckled him. He shook one fist, cursing mother. He pretended to lean on the absurd old-fashioned T-shaped detonator. He hollered, "All right. Have it your way. Here goes!" But mother loved the old rugged lighthouse. He would have to blow her up as well. He ran heavily, lurching, and yanked her from the wall, threw her on the ground. Every time he ran back to the detonator, she had once more pressed herself against the wall. A horrible scene for the youngster standing on the outskirts of the clearing, his hands pressed over his ears—at a respectable distance from his father. The father ran back and forth several times at double-speed, throwing her on the ground, dragging her to the edge of the clearing. Each time, miraculously, before he got back to the detonator, she stood with her back to the lighthouse. "This is it!" he screamed. He laid his hands on the detonator and laughed, but he couldn't do it. "Woman!" he screamed and ran to her. He slapped her with both sides of his hand, stunned her, dragged her to his side. By the time he brushed his hands off and stood ready to detonate, mother had crawled, half-conscious, to the lighthouse and clawed her way up, drooped against the wall.

This went on all day until, at twilight, father dragged himself, at last defeated, into the kitchen and fell asleep on the table with his head on his folded arms. Mother had the decency to clean up after him, knowing what he had sacrificed for love of her. Nonetheless, she left the detonator hooked up and put the entire apparatus in the basement to give father the illusion that he could, at some future time, blow up the lighthouse. She knew he wouldn't. She defeated him through sheer self-assured persistence, and saved me for another day. I saw father redder only once, and I have already described that time.

In like manner, she preserved the glowing man in the black cabinet, though father had tried to coax her into bringing him from her room.

He wriggled his large fingers, motioning her toward him. "*Bring him,*" he would say. "*Bring the little man here. Bring him. I would like to see him. I love him too.*" The smile on his face, broad and thoroughly evil, excited mother. She teased and taunted him, pushed him away. In the end, they disappeared into the room reserved for celebration. Mother loved vitality.

Behind the little man, on the back wall of the cabinet, hung a curious diagram depicting the same form. The outline was covered with a strange, pinched, unreadable language that evidently explained these things.

Father, *father*, and no one else had created these things in a fit of compassion he had since overcome. Compassion had turned to bile in him. He determined to take the universe apart piece-by-piece, beginning with the things he found around him which were wholly created . . . Mother intimated he had made other, bigger things. More impressive things.

"But what!" I demanded. Mother smiled at me with lips pursed as if the answer were incredibly simple. She said, "I have another gift for you."

"But what?" I asked, this time joyful. She reached into a drawer of her desk, withdrew a flat, circular surface that glittered with the reflected light of the dazzling man. I looked at mother and laughed and stared into the object. I took it in my hand. A picture of the dazzling man's face! It moved. I dropped it.

It bounced, then shattered on the stone floor. I dropped to my knees, staring into the shattered glass, the crescent slivers of my own face. Miniature moons (with me the man in each). I pieced them together.

I looked nothing like my parents. My skin pale, yes, but nothing like ivory. Olive-pale. My hair and beard black. I jumped back from the shattered pieces. I assumed that because I looked nothing like my parents I was unbelievably ugly.

My ugliness had been known to my parents all along! They kept mirrors from me not because of any aversion to the excesses of human society, but because they wanted to protect me from my own image.

Father called from the kitchen. "What's this? What's up?" Mother closed the cabinet. I heard father's footsteps on the bottom stairs. I visualized the man standing several steps up from the kitchen, looking up the stairwell. My heart filled with gratitude . . . I punished myself for ever thinking ill of the man who had not, after all, killed his ugly son at birth. "Come down!" father called again. "Come down! We have a visitor." My mother ran down the stairs, her nightgown billowing out behind. I heard them laughing downstairs. The sickness and gratitude and pain I felt became too much. I could not stop the tears which poured down my face. I beat my chest softly with

one fist, mumbling, "Forgiveness, forgiveness." I staggered down into their gay laughter.

Father and mother sat at the kitchen table in a long rectangle of light from the open doorway. They had stopped laughing, but they smiled into the light. Father had his hand on mother's stomach. I peered around the corner, straight into the immense green diamond-shaped head inset with two yellow beads. Background faded away: the lines, the hollow veins in the broad, unmoving face made it look impossibly old. A pronged tongue slipped out and shivered, disappeared.

Dead, I thought. *I am dead*. I imagined I would look beyond to see the length of him wrapped twice around the lighthouse, coils filling the doorway. "Very funny, father," I said. Behind me, I heard them singing: *Happy birthday, dear Edward, happy birthday to you . . .* When father trilled, *and many more*, my sight corrected. From the crying, it must have been, from a teardrop on my eye, magnifying, it must have been.

The lighthouse floor shifted, changed, as when I shut one eye at a time to make the lighthouse dance in front of me. The snake diminished. A tiny green snake, eight or ten inches at most, sat on the kitchen floor, petrified, frozen with fear. Father started after it with a butcher knife. It slithered out the door. Father glanced over his shoulder, "All over the woods this time of year." He followed the snake outside, the knife raised above his head.

Mother laughed and clapped; I couldn't. Something happened in that moment of magnification—I saw the wise and stupid boredom on the snake's face. His expressionlessness filled me with despair. It took over my face as I watched mother laughing. *Brother*, I muttered. Mother turned to me, suddenly shocked. Her laughter died. Happiness died inside me; its corpse rotted, festered. I retreated to the library.

I went to the fireplace and hung over the cold, charred logs of some previous fire. I wandered around the room, touching the books which lined the walls. None interested me. I took several from the shelf anyway. I sat on the couch in front of the fireplace, smelled the decomposing rose on the table in front of me. How often had I sat on this couch in my childhood, reading while the fire blazed. I picked up Mary Shelley's book, ever my favorite, and flipped it over and over in my lap, listening to the clonk of my knuckles on the cover. I tried to stir some source of interest within me. I came up with a tiny, impotent spark of fear. Certain unanswered questions vaguely interested me . . . but my mind wandered.

I stopped flipping the book. A flame of fear, a hot tongue tickled the back of my brain. I smiled; I frowned. I stood. I paced around the couch. I seemed to see the log catch fire, tentatively at first. I knew things, understood . . . the fire raged in yellow and blue and red licks. I shuddered to remember the diagram, the model in the black cabinet.

The diagram could be nothing, *nothing*, I supposed (in my delirium) but a blueprint, the toy a working model. For what? Incredibly simple. Mother was right. Incredibly, incredibly, stupidly simple.

Yes, yes, I ran to my bedroom and bolted the door from the inside. The rabbit, when he saw me, skittered under my bed, cowering, poking his head out long enough to see if I had left yet. I stomped my foot at him. I'd made a mess of my plans for a furry friend to comfort my adolescence. He shivered when he saw me. Which angered me. I grew more aggressive. Never, never would he suffer me to touch his fur. Cruel jokes everywhere!

I sat on the bed, my legs crossed for fear the rabbit would bite me if I hung my feet. Privacy, loneliness. These I needed. Protection. My parents called me for the birthday feast. "Edward, come down!" The table had been set. The smell of cooked fowl drifted through my door mixing with the acrid scent of my fear. I uttered the single word: *unnatural*. I buried my head in my hands.

I sneered at the bulging door. *Father, you cannot come in. Stay out. Destroyer, destroyer.* My father set his shoulder to the door, calling angrily, "Edward! Supper will be cold." Mother beckoned, "Eddy, what's wrong boy?" *Go away mother. Leave your poor monster be.* Even mother could no longer protect me. I envisioned father in his workshop, dismantling, taking things apart, taking all apart he had ever put together. What was left within his reach but me? And only I could keep this bauble from his hands.

But I threw the bolt and opened the door. Father staggered into the room. The rabbit streaked out the door, down the stairs. In the doorway, hands on my hips, I laughed horribly, and when I laughed I felt the laughter ringing in my chest, felt the bigness of me. My parents shrunk, grew older. I laughed *that* laugh and was not sorry. What guilt and shame crept into my voice only intensified the edge of shrillness. I howled, I shrieked. I shook my finger at them.

"You never told me about this, this . . ." I said. Father tried to see around me, into the room. Mother watched my face. "This!" I hollered. I made a wide, expansive gesture to include all the corners of everything. I staggered past them, yelling, "This! This! This!" They watched me lurch down the stairs. I staggered into the woods screaming "This!" But that was not all. This is not the end of the dream of childhood.

I went back that evening and removed the wires and equipment—the old T-shaped detonator—from the basement. I did not know whether it would still work, but I took it through the clearing and stood as father had in memory, but different, different. Need I tell you of my tears? Efflusive. Deluvian. I cried, *forgiveness, forgiveness*, tapping my chest. I leaned on the detonator.

I could not do it. I left the apparatus and wandered through the woods.

I looked at my huge and hideous form in the waters of a nearby river. I made out constellations in the reflected pinpoints of light. I saw an old man, bearded, a youth, I saw . . . many things. I digress. Hours later, in the meager light of early morning, I entered the lighthouse for a final good-bye to the sleeping parents.

I climbed the stairs slowly, quietly. I opened my mother's door. How vulnerably she slept, her hands tucked beneath her chin. I could stand it only briefly. I shut her door and tiptoed to father's room. I envisioned his huge, frightening bulk as I opened the door slowly, ready any moment to feel his dark form rear and fall upon me . . . his bed was empty, the sheet thrown back. I stood in his doorway baffled. Had he gone after me, I wondered. Was the woods full of his clumsy running shadow, an upraised knife in one hand?

I went up the stairs, to the workroom. The door was slightly ajar. I suspected it would be a violent, blood-stained and brooding place, but not so. Neat. Saws, files, knives, hooks hung from the walls. A large wooden table sat in the middle of the room. Since no light glowed inside, I assumed he had left in great haste. I pushed open the door.

There stood father in the dark, inspecting the limp form of my rabbit. It hung over his arm. I threw open the door, stood inside, enraged. I balled my fists. "All right," I said. "The rabbit. Let's have it." Father looked ridiculous, puzzled.

"Edward," he said, almost happily. He held a long syringe up in the other hand. "Look," he said. "We have a visitor." He squeezed the syringe. A stream of dark liquid crossed the space of floor between us. "Mother's blood," he said.

I crossed the workroom and snatched the rabbit from his arm. His face opened angrily; I did not care. "All right," I said, holding the dead rabbit by the ears, "Have it your way." I turned and ran out the door, screaming, "Murderers!"

Down the dark, circular stairs, I no longer cared what noise I made. I crossed the clearing. Some light filtered through the trees from the horizon. I leaned fully on the detonator and watched, distantly, while the lighthouse sailed straight up into the air, a white column of debris borne on a background of deafening black smoke.

Yet, *poor people*, I cried. *Poor, poor souls*. I recalled mother in the morning supping on dewdrops from the petal cup of white wildflowers, father in the flush of excitement on the kitchen floor. I conceived a great pity coming over me, a pity for the lost parents, now that they were lost, for the dead souls of my childhood. I shook my head, held my hands out at my sides, benign destroyer of all those thousands of eons of history recorded in the debris of the lighthouse, then screamed, screamed and held my ears.

My parents, grown huge, large as lighthouses, rose on either side of the white and crumbling column. They threw back their heads and laughed and clapped. They stood in the air and the deafening thunder was their joyous laughter and their clapping, gigantic hands as if they had known everything, *everything* all along. My screaming voice took the shape of a word, that word, "Thieves!" I turned and ran through the trees, holding my ears, closing my eyes, refusing to smell the burning powder, closing, closing into a tiny circle, my mouth filling as if I had bitten my feet and I rolled down the hill crying: "Ladies and gentlemen! Here he comes! The unnatural son of the natural world. Thieves and murderers make way!"

FICTION / JOE ASHBY PORTER

For Nineteen Sixty-eight

1

Such a slipshod slapdash forest of a jungle I'd never seen or imagined or even wanted to—it was partly that it was green and dull grey and partly that it was so hot and wet I'd long ago doffed my pack and my shirt and partly that with every step I took more and more leaves and grass clung to my trousers so that I'd begun to look like a shaggy-legged satyr, and also that it was dead quiet, there were simply no animals to be heard: it reminded me of a bad photograph: things seemed a little greasy, a little slick, like those lights that nag underneath the eyeballs, those almost colorless ones, it reminded me of that French phrase "*comme ci, comme ça*," a little sinister but more just deadening, just tiresome, the vines I held to pull myself along, even they were almost colorless or changed their little colors and could have gone any which way, I could hardly bear to think about it, "ugh" was the only word for it or "whew," it wasn't particularly sunny but it was hot, and sometimes the vines fell or came apart in my hands and there wasn't a flower to be seen, it all looked cheap and washed-up and passed-over like Florida or Viet Nam or what have you, I half expected the vines to be neon signs with their letters burnt out, I remember I said to myself it was as much a time as a place, a welter of eventless conditions, I said there were none of those difficulties that stand up to be counted but only the kind that glimmer and persist, a low flux of a run-down maze like